

Interviewer: Vanessa Huang
Interviewee: Erminio Pinque
Category: Visual/Performance Art
Genre: Puppetry/Music/Street Theatre
Length in Time: 01:14:34

00:00:00

VH: Okay, so this is November 9th, 2004, Vanessa Huang interviewing Erminio Pinque.

00:00:06

EP: Yes, great to be here!

00:00:08

VH: Alright, so I'm here to just – I don't really have a set of preformed questions, so... pretty flexible to what you want to say. But I guess one way to start is who are you, where are you from, who are your parents, where are they from—

00:00:32

EP: Okay. Well, I'm the Artistic Director of the Big Nazo Lab, also known as Big Nazo Puppets, Big Nazo Band, depending on what capacity you see us performing or acting in. So as Artistic Director, I teach a certain style of puppet building, and puppet creature building, actually, the term puppet doesn't always describe what we do, these giant foam, latex, rubber creations. And so I teach the craft, I also teach part-time at RISD, a Creature Creation course, and I also am a guest artist and artist-in-residence in numerous schools, from elementary level to high school, in the state and beyond. And I mentor students from different schools, Hope High School, the Met School, etc. And we have a rock band, that is a giant puppet-creature band. We perform all over the place, and internationally as well. And we also do street theatre and parades, and do community service sort of work, and we work with the International Institute of RI, we work with a number of nonprofit organizations, so that's kind of the basic idea. That's my job, is to kind of keep the thing floating. And we have this storefront stage that we're doing this interview in, which is right in downtown Providence, across from City Hall. There's a lot of walk-in traffic and it sort of serves as an open walk-in museum-studio-gallery workshop, where people can kind of come in, and on a given day we might be rehearsing or actually building puppets here, or just hanging out, and people come in and take it in, and get involved. And that's how we even build up our crew, is that people sometimes come in and volunteer, and they end up becoming regulars. I'm originally from New York state, I'm first-generation Italian American, my parents are both from central Italy, and I went – I came to Providence to go to Rhode Island School of Design. And did

00:02:32

EP: some traveling, but ended up staying, because of the affordable studio space that was available in the mills in downtown empty buildings – which is quickly changing!

00:02:42

VH: When did you get here?

00:02:44

EP: I came to RISD in the very early 80s, I guess it was 80 or 79 or something.

00:02:52

VH: What was it like here at that time?

00:02:55

EP: Downtown providence. Really, really quiet, but in a different sort of way. There was this sort of – it was a really interesting town, I mean when looking at schools, I'd been to a lot of different schools that were like traditional campus schools, you know, set in nice farm settings, or charming downtown cities, but Providence had this funky, mysterious, even dangerous feel to it that was really interesting and appealed to my sensibilities.

00:03:23

VH: Can you tell me more about that?

00:03:25

EP: Well, I mean, just coming into town was an interesting situation. We had, my parents had stopped by to visit some relatives who lived in Cranston and got lost and came into Providence by way of Manton Avenue, drove by the Atlantic Mills Flea Market, which used to take place outdoors in the parking lot. It was a summer day and it just looked like a scene from a Victor Hugo novel. There were, you know, hundreds of people walking around, it was just this bizarre, just people carrying old furniture, broken mirrors, and wearing eye patches, and you know, just it was a really funky scene, you know, just all kinds of people from all walks of life. And then as we kind of drove around and got lost, in different interesting, one-way cobbled streets, you know, made our way to downtown, found the Hill. You know, it just seemed like an interesting old new England, you know, puzzle that we were driving through. And the campus itself was comprised of different kinds of buildings that were built in different times, and not really efficient, you know, there was a print-making studio located in a building that was probably never meant to be an art studio, and so I just thought that it was a creative place. And I really liked what I saw and I thought it might be a good place to get started getting funky myself. And then I think that in those days, like I said, Providence was quieter and downtown was mostly this sort of – a lot of abandoned buildings but a lot of funky mom and pop shops. A lot of strange, you know, like a strange barber shop, and a weird little like collectible card shop that also sold

cigars. And then a shoe shining place. You know, I mean just kind of stuff that you didn't expect to – you know, that was rapidly changing from the urban landscapes of America. This was not like a, kind of like a

00:05:25

EP: 'young professionals' environment, you know, with hip coffee shops, and fashionable clothing stores. So there was actually this clothing store that just recently took their mannequin out of the window on Washington Street, where there was a mannequin wearing this horrible 70s wig, you know, this blunt, lamb-chop side burns, and the mannequin had fallen forward and was leaning against the window. And it had been like that for as long as I had been in Providence. They never changed it! It was just leaning up against the glass. In his like weird polyester suit. And I just thought that was so hilarious, that this little store that time forgot. Now that mannequin has been set upright and the wig has been changed, and the clothing is different. So that was the end of that era. But there was a lot of club life. And a lot of strange little bars and nooks that you would never know about unless you'd been initiated. So Providence was the kind of place that you'd roll into, and say, man! This place, you know, it's sort of shadowy, downtown there's a lot of late-night diners. Now there's Haven Brothers, but there used to be this place called Mike's Diner, and a bunch of silver trucks that used to park. And the club scene was really vibrant, you know, like Lupo's and the Living Room, were all on the same street, on Westminster Street, and the Met Café was a little dive underneath the highway overpass. And these places were teeming with life because, you know, there wasn't – it was, it seemed really hip in an amazing, music and culture, there was a folk art scene, that if you, once you became hip to it, it was pretty amazing that it existed here. There were people doing theatre in found spots and places. And the main energy was that if anyone was doing this stuff in Providence, they obviously weren't doing it for the glamour. They weren't doing it to get connected to the big media circuits, because, you know, you'd go to LA or New York to do that. So if you met somebody who was doing performance art, wearing weird costumes, you know, writing original music, and going out every

00:07:25

EP: Friday and Saturday night and performing someplace in this little town, you knew they were doing it because it really meant something to them. And people who supported it weren't supporting it because it seemed to feel cool and connected to the larger picture, it was because they really saw value in it. And so that was – that really made an impression on me. I felt like it was the most real place I'd been to. I felt like it was authentic, that the characters that you met had – and it was a weird mix of people. You'd go to an event, or see a club – a band – and there would be like people old enough to be your grandfather out there dancing along with like you know, young college students dancing. And so that mix led for all kinds of friendships that would normally never happen. And more and more, we're seeing I think today, you know, everything is designed for a certain clientele. And you're sort of appealing to a certain sensibility, and so people kind of find their niches and go and hang out there and feel safe, and not awkward, being in the wrong place. But, in those days in Providence, and even now to a degree, there's a sense that anybody can wander in, and would be just as out of place as anyone else. So therefore everybody was in the right place. And you'd end up talking to people that you

would normally never know, and there was a cross-communication. Someone would learn about somebody's art project, and you'd learned that they owned a backhoe, and that's how they earned a living, and you know, meeting at this funky happening. And it was cool. And not to say it wasn't you know, also like a mysterious place, sometimes potentially you felt like potentially you could easily live in Providence and never even know, you know, all these sort of secret happenings and sort of like, kind of groups that were meeting regularly, you know, right next to you. You just never knew that next door there was this mysterious bathhouse, you know. That you just wondered why there was always steam coming out of the window.

00:09:25

EP: You know, it was that kind of a thing, it had kind of like a Lovecraft – actually funny I should mention Lovecraft, cause Lovecraft lived here, actually, and is buried in Providence. And Edgar Allan Poe lived for a little while, I think on Benefit Street, and, you know, that kind of fit right in. And there was this New England, giant old trees, old Victorians and funky beautiful fall that takes place here, it was a really evocative place. And the long, brutal winter, and you know, the four seasons really are very, very obvious here. I mean, when it's spring, it's spring. You really know it. And summer really kicks in, and so I think the four seasons and some—all that people experience going through those changes is very much part of the feeling here in Providence. And it being close to the ocean is a wonderful thing, I mean, 20 minutes and you're at a beach. That's unbelievable. And being between New York and Boston isn't too shabby either, so...And close to funky other cities, like Lowell, and Worcester, and Woonsocket, who are all now more like what Providence used to be. If you go down to downtown Woonsocket, it's still a little bit of a land that time forgot but that's changing rapidly as well.

00:10:35

VH: How did you get here?

00:10:37

EP: You mean by car, or boat, or—

VH: Physically this space, and also, to be doing what you're doing—

00:10:44

EP: Oh! Okay. Well, I think to answer the last part, about doing what I do, I think, you know, Halloween had a lot to do with it. I remember, you know, being an art student, and, you know, Halloween time coming around, trying to make our assignment. I just remember we were especially motivated, my and my class of students, we were just like, 'Hey, we're being asked to make something that you can wear, that's a plant or animal form,' you know. 'Let's make this our Halloween costumes.' So we went crazy! and just went all out, and there was funky, amazing Halloween parties everywhere. And a lot of them gave cash prizes. So we would go out and win them. So, one Halloween, you know, just made a couple hundred bucks here and there, going to these little places and winning the costume contests. And then there's a long story about a

costume contests that a number of us won. This was, I was out of school, but we won a ten thousand dollar prize, which ended up not being—

00:11:45

VH: What was it for?

00:11:47

EP: It was – we won Most, whatever costume, you know, three of us went as this sort of family of ogres, inside this Massachusetts – but it wasn't 10,000 dollars. It was like – I'm not complaining – there was like a thousand dollars in cash that made it, still, the biggest prize I've ever won. But the rest of it was all ridiculously inflated coupons for local businesses, for you to get your shoes re-soled, and, you know, a massage at this place, you know, which valued at four hundred dollars, whatever! It was – and there was this limo ride that you could take advantage of, but, you know, how could you possibly use five thousand dollars of limo ride, when the guy didn't really want to drive you anywhere except to work? But anyway, so Halloween. Competing for Halloween costume contests, and being inspired by different groups that, you know, I had been lucky to see, everything from Bread and Puppet and Antenna Theatre that came to perform at RISD and to the work of even Brown professor, John Emigh, who, you know, is sort of an expert Balinese mask performer, and who did Little Red Riding Shawl in the RISD Auditorium, and you know, here's this mild-mannered guy who, you know, transforms into a completely bi – you know, a completely outgoing, frothing-at-the-mouth, you know, almost demonic personality by the use of a half-face mask. I mean, that was really inspirational. So a lot of stuff like that. When I got out of school, I worked at an organization called the Puppet Workshop, run by a guy called Mark Kohler. And that was a major thing, too, because it was my first job out of school. You know, making puppets. I mean how great can that be! So I learned a lot and – about the state through that job, because I was never—

00:13:31

VH: The state?

00:13:32

EP: About Rhode Island. Because it was a touring group that went around to different schools and festivals. And I was never one of those students that, you know, would live in the bubble of College Hill. I mean, Thayer Street was nice, but come on, there's a whole downtown. So all of us in those days, and I think it's happening again now with my students. I mean, I think people are curious about getting out of their world of, you know, academia, and the safe collegiate bubble. And getting out into downtown, and maybe beyond. And so we used to do this thing, we'd call it 'slumming,' you know, just kind of dress appropriately for hanging out in places where you wouldn't be identified as a college student. Just kind of get out there, and start exploring. So we would do that habitually, you know. So working at the Puppet Workshop as an extension of that for me, just like now we were having excuses to go into Warwick and Cranston, and performing at somebody's, you know, company picnic, or a school. So now I was seeing

more and more about the community, the ethnic diversity in the area, you know, finding little restaurants to eat in while we were in between gigs. And that's kind of what I do with Big Nazo now. We perform all over the state, and New England, and like I mentioned, the country as well. And it's a great excuse, you know, you get this job, you're given directions, you have to find this place, you show up, you unload, you do a show, you meet a whole audience, you meet all the people who hired you, you have a discussion afterwards, then you kind of go to a local place to eat, or you ask, 'Hey, what's cool around here?' and then by the time you come home, you've just, you know, you've discovered another part of your world. And being a performer and an artist is the perfect excuse for that. It's all about, I mean if your mission is to reach people where they live, then that's a great way to kind of find out where they live, and then make it where you live. Make it, transform it into your circle of activity. But how I got here, in terms of

00:15:32

EP: me having this studio, I think that that work then led to my interest in doing adult puppetry. Meaning adult, I mean, just puppetry that was not just for kids, you know. And there's a stigma about puppets, I mean, you know, the idea that it is 'kiddy', and it is fuzzy, and, you know, and animal characters that are singing and dancing. So my work with Big Nazo formed when I was – I made, I started making puppets that were not cloth covered and not muppet-like. Or hand-in-rod...

00:16:06

VH: When was this?

00:16:07

EP: This was right – I mean, see these things happened simultaneously. Like while I was a student, I was experimenting with foam and trying stuff. But while working at the Puppet Workshop, I was working with a more kind of traditional puppet style. So during that time, we would mess around and experiment. And found different ways to surface the foam, and covering it with, you know, latex and acrylic paint, was the sort of stuff that happened during that experimentation. And my interest was to break outside of the stage. So we used to have to set up this big stage, or even a little stage, I just thought, 'Why a stage?' you know. A stage is great, but imagine, you know, being in the, you know, exploring more, being in the real world, so... And that was something that some of the walk-around characters at the Puppet Workshop would do as well, just a giant puppet walking around. And that really appealed to me. So I traveled to Europe. I went to Charleville Mezieres in France. That was my mission – to see the International Puppet Festival there. So I started in England, and – in London – and worked my way through France, and got into Italy. So that experience was where Big Nazo was formed. I mean I was performing street theater in Italy and everyone was yelling, 'Grande Nazo, Grande Nazo' – Big Nose – you know, so that was how I got the name. And when I say 'performing street theatre,' you know, it's easy to look back and say 'Oh, you know, this is how it happened,' and it sounds like there was intention. It wasn't. It was basically, I had this desire to experiment. So I was dressing up as a puppet character and walking around, you know, Paris. Just to do it. And what happened was that people then started surrounding me. And then I felt like I had to do something to keep them

entertained, and then that improvisation led to some kind of discovery. You know, it was just like, 'Oh, wow, that dog barked at me, I bark back,' and everyone cracked up. I thought I should probably do that again if that happens, you know, and

00:18:07

EP: then people started throwing money. And the throwing money part was like, 'Hey, this is – I'm getting paid for this.' So I started to hook up with other street performers, and then together, we started doing shows. And then we started to be invited to stay for free at hostels, and – so it was a great adventure. So when I came back, I started doing street theatre in Providence, which was a trip, because—

00:18:27

VH: When was this?

00:18:28

EP: This was the mid 80s—

00:18:29

VH: Or when did you go to the International—

00:18:31

EP: That was around 1984 probably. 85 – 84 or 85. No, I think it was 85. Cause 86 was when I officially started doing sort of Big Nazo street performance stuff. And we started doing stuff in Faneuil Hall in Boston, and Washington Square Park in New York, and we were invited to international festivals in Canada, and then, you know, one thing led to another. Where you go from being a street theatre troupe to being – having an act, and then taking that act, and then people see the act, and then other people want the act, and then suddenly, you know, you're forming this repertoire of performance stuff that you can provide. And so we formed a rock band eventually, because the idea was to keep taking puppets into places that they didn't belong, that was the thrill. We—

00:19:21

VH: Where are places that they—

00:19:22

EP: Well, you know, we've performed in every conceivable type of venue, I mean I can't – we haven't done a funeral. But we have done every kind of private function: parties, graduation parties, we've done retirement parties, we've done a hundred year old women's birthday parties, we've performed in bowling alleys, we've performed in, you know, like next to the buffet line at

a Chinese restaurant in Woonsocket. I mean right there, where people are putting their chow mein on the plate, and we're behind it, you know, playing. We've – every kind of public space, you know. We've done strolls where we've wandered into department stores, onto buses, into spaces that were private spaces, we've knocked on doors and walked into homes, we've been invited to improvise and walk around dorms, and just knock on people, you know, as part of a promotion or something. We've stood outside of car dealerships and waved to traffic, I mean every – you know, we've had, we've been commissioned to make giant pieces of food, and wear those pieces of food and wave outside of a restaurant. I mean we've, you know, it's just crazy. We've even once did a stripper performance, where – we were constantly getting calls because our listing was under 'Entertainers' in the yellow pages. And we wondered why we kept getting calls for male strippers. And when we finally looked at our listing and Big Nazo was there between 'Adult Entertainment' and 'Other Entertainments,' so I guess Big Nazo sounded like some kind of male stripper club or something. So we finally even did one of those shows, where we sent a puppet stripper, you know, totally absurd, you know, he had a foam body. Foam muscles, and – that's a long story, which would be a whole other interview. It got ugly. But, so – I mean I think that's what I mean by every kind of place and places where, that puppets don't belong. And that's why people don't call them puppets, I mean because when you're not on a stage and you're not being what people expect

00:21:22

EP: from that kind of theatre, they don't know what it is. They're just like, 'This guy showed up. This thing that was purple and green, with a big nose and' – you know – 'three eyeballs came to our event and freaked everyone out.' That's how people usually will describe it. So, you know. So eventually – and I say we, I mean I, Big Nazo secured a space in the Providence Performing Arts Center. Had a studio there for many, many years, which was wonderful. It was right in downtown. And, like I said, Providence was really, really quiet back then. We used to be able to work on the sidewalk of the theatre without interruption. I mean it was that – on a June afternoon, July afternoon, you could just set up shop on the street, you know, basically the sidewalk, and work on a float. And no one would ever come around and say anything. It was pretty dead. And then—

00:22:17

VH: This was—

00:22:19

EP: That was all through the late 80s and 90s, all through the 90s. And then eventually we were asked to leave the Performing Arts Center. The third floor was going to be turned into something they could make more money off of. And so we were ousted. This was happening when a lot of different artists were being ousted from all their digs, and you know, this was sort of – we became, sort of became a poster child for it, because we were well-known. We were being asked to leave, and there was this visual of all these giant puppets being paraded out of the theatre, out of our elevator, onto the streets. It was sort of, you know, used as the big story to sort of bring attention to all the artists that had been slowly losing their spaces, you know, because the change

had come, you know. You know, the typical thing, artists go into spaces that nobody really wants, and they create an environment that becomes more attractive than the previous one, and then it becomes more possible for someone to imagine themselves in that very space, because someone's in it. So that happened to us a couple more times. We then – we left that space and had to move into our storage space in Olneyville, which we still keep. Then we moved into a space where we worked on this AS220 Fool's Ball right in the Smith Building, right across the street, which is now Lumiere Hair Salon. So you know how that ended. We were in there for a while, and that was great, and then the hair salon came in and we were once again back in Olneyville, working out of our storage space. And then worked on this space right across the street. And it was a difficult and long, you know, an effort that was pretty intense. But we got in through some really great people who were the owner of the building and who were fans. And so with their help, we got into the building, and we're here. Right here, next to City Hall, next to the banks, and it's a great thing to be

00:24:19

EP: in the middle of a downtown, next to such big institutions. Because it says to people, you know, whether it be conscious or subconscious, it says, 'Look, art, theatre, giant puppets, they're important, too. They have a storefront right next to other big things that we consider to be important,' you know. And that's why I've always wanted to maintain a presence in the city. It'd be a lot easier to work, you know, in the outskirts, have easier parking and lower rent. But the point is that to be downtown, to be next to the buses, next to the colleges, next to where people are actually working and playing and walking, means that we are connected to the community. So – hope that answered your question, an hour later.

00:24:59

VH: Yeah. You mentioned something really interesting about – over the phone, you were talking about masking and unmasking, and...

00:25:09

EP: Oh! About, when we were like discussing media literacy, and the idea of—

00:25:15

VH: Yeah, can you just talk more about that?

00:25:16

EP: And how it relates to the political scene, or anything in particular—

00:25:19

VH: Sure—

EP: Okay, well a lot of our aesthetic with Big Nazo is this idea that we – it's a medium, you know. You're working with puppets. You realize that everyone is in a place of suspense. There's a suspension of disbelief going on. So because we're in the art form that requires suspension of disbelief, people kind of know that we know that they know that we know that they know that we know that they know that we're puppets, that we're not real people. That is exciting, because once you've got people participating in that – it's not about fooling them, it's about 'Let's get passed that and let's talk about what's going on.' Or 'Let's just do something that takes you and transports you.' That very much has to do with the theatre of transgression. I'm making up fancy terms here, but I guess it's transformative theatre, you know. It's you're – the performer is transforming and so is the environment, and so is the audience. And not only that, but the audience is actually participating in the transformation. Without their giving into it, you know, there's not really anything happening. So it's really fun to respect the audience and to have fun with them by actually revealing the device. But not losing any of the power. So one of the Nazo's unwritten laws is that we never reveal our identities. And we never disrobe in public, never take our head off at the end of the show, we never come out and take a curtain call as actors. The idea is that in the time that people are experiencing us, there's this special place that we're creating. And that happens from the complete commitment to being the characters. And producing the show. And that – the fact that we're completely committed to keeping that illusion alive allows the audience to sort of say, 'Hey,' you know. 'It's worth investing in this illusion, cause they're not disappointing me.'

00:27:19

EP: Or they're not showing me what I secretly want to know.' So, you sustain that long enough, and people are just there with you. And so we do that and it's really great in sort of like a, I don't know if it's sort of a Brechtian device or something, but you know, it's great to have the actor stand outside of his character. You know, to have the actor to sort of like say, 'I'm this person, but I'm also manipulating this person.' You know. I don't know why my cat wants to chew this cord. He has got to chew something else. So we like in this show to have this layer of realities where a creature-puppet character is, you know, not what it seems to be. And it takes its head off and reveals yet another head underneath it. And then another character says, 'But wait a second. You're not even part of our show, you're a puppet heckler that's come from the audience, and you're making fun of us. Get out of here!' And it ends up that that puppet heckler brings this other thing on, which is a real person, which we then dress up in the show, and turn that person into like, for instance, we turn people into a monkey during our show. But during the song that person's made to dance to, another monkey comes on who's a Nazo monkey, but we refer to the Nazo monkey as a real monkey. And the person who's dressed up as a monkey is the person in the suit. So the whole encounter's like, 'Oh no! That monkey thinks you're a real monkey.' But of course, at this point, the audience is even confused because in the reality of our show, this is a real monkey. He's not a real monkey, but yet we saw him get dressed up in a monkey suit. So it gets really – becomes really very semiotically complex. But if you're that sort of person that says, 'Hey, wow. This is really esoteric—'

(Laughter)

EP: Jeez, what that, oh I'm sorry. The pause on the mike was that my cat began to eat the recording device. No, but what happens there is that either you're sort of the kind of person who says, 'Wow, this is really interesting and complex and intellectually, you know, like these guys are going for something very, very tongue in cheek, and esoteric – or you're just

00:29:19

EP: you know, someone who thinks it's funny, you know. Like 'Oh, the big man took his head off, and he's got a little head now. That's hilarious.' You know, and 'Oh and now that head came off cause it was bitten off by the monster and he's left,' but then miraculously he comes back with his head intact, like a Looney Tunes cartoon. And no one asks, you know, 'Why did Wiley Coyote' – you know – 'he just fell off the cliff. Why isn't he in the next cartoon? Why isn't he dead?' You know, we get into that world and it becomes exhilarating. And when you give people that thrill, where it's not reality, you can then start talking about things in a way where people start to think of the bigger concept. If you have a character that can't be killed, maybe you're able to discuss violence in a different way, than if the reality of violence is being demonstrated. So you can almost cartoonify, you know, like how absurd certain things in society are. Because if it exists in the world of the cartoon, and isn't that much different in the real world, you start to say, 'Well, I know the cartoon character. I know there's not really a coyote who talks in my world.' But in the world of the cartoon, there are forces that, you know, that create the complications, you know, that lead to problems. And then why is that not just a cartoon, why is it real? So you know, you start to wonder about our real life cartoon mentality. You know, I know that was really a stretch. And, don't quote me on that one. But the funny thing about any interview is that you just sort of get challenged to start saying things that you don't normally really verbalize. So I'm sort of like surprised at some of these things I'm saying, you know. But heck, it's good to talk about it. Or hear it for the first time, in some cases. So that's what, in response to your question about what it is about these dual identities, is that we're really a theatre of multi-appearances, you know, multi-personalities. Things are not what they seem. And to me, this really ties into what I think is some of the most important things, in our day and age – to educate

00:31:19

EP: everyone, too. It's just media literacy. To understand that what we see, what we read, how someone comes across when delivering a certain kind of speech, and how are they addressing people, and why are they doing certain mannerisms, and why is the camera, you know, being asked to only cropped from the shoulders up in a certain debate. You know, there's a lot of control on the way that we see things. And it actually influences the comment – the content. It's no different than if you frame a photograph with a certain kind of frame, or, you know, how you hang it. Is it against a brick wall, or is it against a nice white wall? Is it lead or is it not lead? Is there a noisy restaurant in the background, or is it a totally quiet Zen monastery that you're looking at the work? This influences the way that we look at things. But we too often forget how the setting and the context influences the content. So what Big Nazo does is we embrace the fact that our environment is always a challenge that we have to interpret. And the fact that when we perform, we don't transport our own stage, we don't have that environment that says, 'Hey, look at our world. This is where we're at.' What we do is we say, 'Okay, you've invited us to this

event. We notice that there isn't a stage like we had hoped there would be, so we're now, we're performing on the grass, and the sun is in our eyes, and here's a huge tree that's overhanging and our puppet heads are hitting the tree. So what happens then, in our improvisation, that becomes a plus. It's like, 'How do we work a tree into this? Well, we came from the tree, and this' – well, you know, the grass, well let's have a character that starts eating the grass, or let's justify that as being why we're all slipping and falling all the time. Or whatever. And then something new gets invented. And what we plan to do – it doesn't really happen the way we planned it – and we have to just be brave enough to go forward with it and hope that it works out for the best. So

00:33:20

EP: it's kind of like, you know, getting good at something that isn't practical. It's like surfing, or – I mean, I use surfing as an analogy for, often because it's not something that makes sense on paper. It's like you're going to take this board, and you're going to get on this wave of water, you're going to ride it just right. And then you're going to not kill yourself. And then if you're really good, you can do these tricks. So when somebody is learning that craft, it's not something you read in a book and then you start to do it. I think you kind of have to get used to how the water works, you have to get used to falling off a board, you have to get used to standing on it, you start getting hit by bad waves, good waves, you know. You meet different people along the way. And then suddenly there's this sort of like new sensibility that you form, you can pass on, but not through conventional instruction. It's sort of the instruction of experience. So we're in that market, I think. There's a lot people have to go through in doing what we do. I mean, you have to wear masks, you have to be hot, you can't see as well, there's stuff rubbing against you, you know, there's a number of physical handicaps that you incur. And then you transcend them, because you know the power that you've got is worth it. You know, you've got attention, you get focus, you get instant love, or instant disgust, depending on what the character is in the context. But you always get this big reaction. And so that's what makes it, you know, a Big Nazo endeavor, is that we're going for something bold.

00:35:08

VH: What personally – well I'm interested in also your childhood, and growing up. And what drives you, as well, and if those two are related.

00:35:23

EP: Okay. Well I come from a background where, you know, there was not a lot of support for art, you know, for my being an artist or an actor. And I wanted to be an actor, you know, and was also an artist. And so I combined the two. And the big decision to go to art school was that it would be impossible to convince, I would get any support, to get, you know, to get – let me put it this way. To get sort of the support that I would want from my parents. You know, I could convince them that an artist could earn a living, but it was hard to sort of prove it at the time. And, you know, I take a lot of pride in being able to do both now. And they also are really into it, and support it. But I think that they were always supportive of my talents, it's just that it – they couldn't understand, having come from, you know, working-class, immigrant background, how one could seriously take a career in what they consider to be playfulness, you know. How could

you make a living and get serious with that. So I was, you know, the school artist, and I would draw, and I was in plays, and I loved that stuff. I was also a good student, and you know, probably could have pursued a lot of other disciplines. And – but I feel that all my reading and my thirst for knowledge and everything that I use as a young student, you know, helps inform me with what I do with my characters. We're not just doing, you know, simplistic kind of like puppets-bashing-each-other kind of shows. They're really tuned into different things. And that, I owe that to the education – the well-rounded education I got. But anyway, my background is basically just, you know, growing up as a first-generation Italian American kid, you know. I was feeling a little out of place, you know, I grew up in a rural area,

00:37:23

EP: upstate New York, where everyone on the street were from the same village in Italy or close to it. And so I spoke Italian as a first language, I didn't speak any English when I first went to kindergarten – which I can't imagine what that was like. Maybe that's why I can't remember those early memories! What it was like to be a little kid. I think I just had a different vocabulary at the time. So I was a pretty shy kid, I think, and – but really probably could express myself through my art and through acting, you know, as soon as it was okay to be loud and to be funny. Let me see, what else, I mean I think that... You know, I mean I was recently at a high school reunion and I was always kind of stunned to hear people say like, 'Yeah, you know, you were always so wild,' or 'so funny' or 'so crazy.' You know, I never perceived myself as being that person. I guess I kind of that thought I was a kind of like getting wild – is there something wrong with the mike? You hearing stuff?

00:38:31

VH: I think it's off.

00:38:31

EP: It's recording—

00:38:33

VH: Oh, okay.

00:38:34

EP: Let me just hear your headphones for a second. (Puts on headphones) Check, one two – oh no, it's recording.

00:38:40

VH: Oh okay. I'm sorry.

00:38:41

EP: No, it's okay. Let me just pause it for a second. Pause, again, and it's recording—

00:38:45

VH: Alright—

00:38:48

EP: What was your question again?

00:38:48

VH: I was asking about...oh! Growing up.

00:38:52

EP: Oh right about my childhood. Anything specific? Cause it was a long childhood and it's been a long time—

VH: I'd like to hear whatever you'd like to share—

00:39:00

EP: Yeah, I mean it's one of those things where if you were to say specifically, like 'So tell me what you did at the junior prom,' then suddenly I'd have a lot to say. But looking at all my childhood, I think the main thing I would say is that I went from being in a rural area, which gave me the experience of actually, you know, walking through woods. And, you know, rolling up my pant-legs and wading through ponds, catching frogs. I mean, this is something that I realize now was a very precious thing, that I'm very lucky to have experienced. Cause I work with so many kids who never – will never experience that, who've never, just, you know, been amongst cows and chickens. And, you know, walked up wooded paths with no people. To just kind of have that basic interaction with nature. Which I took for granted, which of course is a reality, you know. So I lived in a rural area, it was a bit secluded – not secluded, but it was a small community and it was like an extension of where my family was from. And then – you know, going to school and obviously realizing that, you know, it's a different world out there. And then moving from this area when I was seven to where my parents still live now, and my brothers live in New York, and on the Hudson River. Just upstate of the city, about an hour north of the Hudson River. And living there was a big change. You know, now I was closer to New York City and much more of a – you know, there's a different sensibility. It wasn't upstate New York, woodland community now. It was people whose parents who maybe worked in the city. And it was an interesting mix. It was a town in which the elementary school I went to was mostly Irish, Italian, you know, families. Working-class, blue collar. And the – when we all merged with the other schools in middle school. And the other schools that we merged with

00:41:01

EP: were the other extreme – either kids whose parents were architects and graphic designers and, you know, just people who were Manhattan-based, perhaps. And so you had this culture shock of, you know, just kind of like the working-class kids and the kids who had been exposed to a lot more culture and art. And so high school was this interesting battleground, kind of strange – it wasn't a battleground, it was an interesting melting pot of different aesthetics. You know, I mean, real classic. I mean the cheerleaders and the football captains, and the band, and the – not the greasers, but the, you know, like the drop-outs. We used to call them the 'chain gang' cause that's where they would hang out, by this big chain that separated the parking lots. And that's where everyone would smoke or whatever. And then you had every other kind of like archetype, kind of adolescent high school archetype. You know, the 'bad boys' and the jocks. And the, you know, it was just all over the place. And so it was full of characters. And I just found my place in between all that, you know, I mean I was in the high school band, I was in theatre, I got along with everybody. You know, like the guys who would used to want to beat me up then liked me because I could draw cool stuff with ballpoint pen on their jackets, you know what I mean? And I found that art was a way of sort of, you know, even escaping a beating every now and then, if you were an artist. People like – a classic thing was myself and my friend Scott George, we were like the school artists. And we used to draw on the school newspaper. And what happened was there was a girl whose father was, taught at Parson's School of Design in New York City. So my freshman year, this guy liked our work, and he met with us and arranged for us to go and have a free drawing class at this college. So it was two geeky high school kids. This is the 70s. So I mean when I say geeky, I mean it. I mean like floral print shirts, and like that awful, you know, haircut you had to wear. And you just

00:43:01

EP: couldn't find good clothes. The 70s are really overrated. Everything was bell-bottoms, it was awful. So we would go down to New York City, get on the subway, you know, get on the train, and take the subway, go to 14th Street, you know, go to the 11th floor of this building and be in a drawing class, you know, with like adults, grown-up, cool people. And there were nude models, you know, and so when we went back to school, suddenly, you know, all those tough guys were always like, 'Artist, faggot,' you know, whatever, all the derisions that you would get if you were like somebody that, you know, who wasn't just tossing a ball around. Now suddenly they were really interested, and like, 'So, uh, that your sketchbook?' They wanted to see my pictures. They wanted to see my drawings, you know. I mean I think it blew their mind that like while they fantasized about it, like the two art nerds got to draw real, live naked women, you know. So that was the beginning of realizing like it was pretty cool, you know, to invest in your artistic ability. That you could win respect, even awe. And you know, so that's always been, I mean through my childhood, always, everything I've done, whether it be theater productions, or just working, I've always felt that like whatever I was involved in was always the underdog activity. You know, it was always the thing that was not really enforced in the greater society. You know, it would have been a lot easier to have just been, you know, just sort of examine the surroundings and say, 'You know what? It's going to really pay off to be totally into sports, because' – you know, this is what's admired, this is what's respected. This is what, you know, this is what the girls seem to be interested in, etc. And to, you know, make that choice and say, 'You know, I'm doing this thing. I'm going to create this performance, I'm going to paint these big things, and

we're going to make a video, and we're going to do this. And to just do it because it in itself seemed great. And then to have people say, 'Wow. That's great, what you're doing.' And to break the mold, just have people

00:45:01

EP: like wanting to see this, and loving it. Who weren't demographically supposed to like it. So that's been my story ever since. I just feel like there's no question, that, you know, going for what's in should never be the motivation unless you're sincerely attracted to it, you know. You know, the idea is that you get the idea to do something, do it, and the audience, you know, is going to be there. People are going to be thankful that you've let something happen that they secretly have wanted all along. And the thing with Big Nazo I've always said that you know when I first started, it was like we created a service, and – we created a product that no one knew they wanted yet. It's a weird place to be. You know, like no one knows they love this yet. So you go through that painful and awkward time of like trying to represent it. People are like, 'So wait a second. You're trying to tell me that there's costumes, and yet you're playing music' – and everything is like this embarrassing, you know, you have to sell yourself. You have to go in and work for less, and do stuff that, you know, just to kind of break the ice. And as soon as this person gets it, they're like, 'Well this is great! But I don't even know how to talk about it!' So there's still that problem, you know, until it becomes something people can wrap their brains around. And to this day we have that problem. I mean in this area in New England now, there seems to have been some kind of trickle-down where people kind of, 'Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah I've heard of this,' they're open to it. But in other parts of the country, it's like they've never seen anything like it. They just can't believe it. But as soon as they have us down there, they have us, a local neighboring town, or a state nearby – this year, this past year we were, you know, in Mississippi, Alabama, we performed in South Carolina. These are places that, you know – Texas – they're new zones for us, the South! And it's really different. We've shared stages with, you know, Christian rock bands. We are so completely bizarre compared to everything. People love it.

00:47:01

EP: It's like, I'm telling you. I mean, people love it, and to the extent that they get it – that's debatable. I'm not sure like if people sometimes realize, that what we're doing is actually kind of subversive, you know, I mean even – we often will create scenarios in which the character is embodying the archetypal conservative, you know, sometimes even bigoted points of view, just in terms of like, we try to say, 'What does the small-minded person think?' and we create that person. We have that person go up there and we make fun of consumerism and even like blind patriotism. That's all disguised within, you know, it's not the USA we're talking about, it's about an alien commander who's come to earth to invade, but he doesn't have an exit strategy. You know, whatever. We do these things. It's pretty overt, you know, if you're reading between the lines it's what we're talking about and what we're saying. But even if you don't get that, people like the themes. They just don't get that they should be applying this sensibility to their real lives. It's, you know, they all agree. No one should be able to scare others into submission. Nobody should, you know, convince people through fear to do things that they normally would not be predisposed to do. You know, these are all things that the average person agrees with. You

know, they don't think that the loud-mouth guy should push his agenda. They don't think that, you know, that people getting up and having fun and doing things that may seem risqué is necessarily bad. And that music and art shouldn't be allowed context and that the music is in fact too loud or anything like that. And that it was wrong for the volunteer to get up and dance in the monkey suit whose butt was showing. I mean he basically was a nude person but he's a monkey. So that's how we get away with that. But when we dress them up they've got a giant belly and a huge butt. So these things – we've done these things in very conservative communities. We've even performed our shows at a Catholic school once, where our volunteer was a nun and we had to make her dance to a rock song. We thought we were going to hear it at the end of the show, but people like it. They don't realize that what they're celebrating, you know, actually

00:49:01

EP: kind of somehow goes against their functioning values, sometimes, you know. The way they actually live their lives and how they instruct others to behave. So it's a strange place. You get this privilege of sneaking in. You know, and you're like embraced. We haven't always been embraced, my god! I mean I've collected letters that we've gotten but we're proud of the letters. I mean. Well, one letter we got years ago – we performed in Barrington, Rhode Island at Winter Fest, I think it was. And we had a character who came up – it was, it took place in the high school at one of the schools, and the character who came up was the principal of the school. He just came into school on Saturday for some reason, and, you know, he was like, 'This is inappropriate, you shouldn't be up here' – you know – 'with this music and these puppets. You should be at home with your slide rulers doing your homework, arithmetic, math, so you can become engineers' – and, you know – 'people who can really give back to society. We all know that art is superfluous.' You know, I mean in not so many words. But basically his message was that, look. Art is fine every now and then, you know, when you have absolutely nothing left to do. But until you take care of the real thing, you know, this is inappropriate, it shouldn't even be happening in school. I mean it's a place where serious lectures should be taking place. And then the guy constantly comes up and dissects our performance. And every time a kid is up there on stage having fun, he comes up and says, 'What's your name? You should be sitting down. You know, where are you parents? Are they sitting out in the audience? Shame on you!' You know what I mean? This kind of stuff. And what starts to happen is the kids start do boo this character. And they rebel against him. Now what inevitably happens is the character is eaten by a monster in this scene, which is symbolic of all the forces of anarchy. And then later is digested and returns. And he says, you know, 'I had time to think while I was being digested by that monster and I realize now that' – he deconstructs the show and he says – 'I realize now that, you know, I'm reacting to the fact that when I was your age, kids, I never had any fun. And so I wanted you guys to be more like me, but I realize now that maybe you guys have the potential to be

00:51:01

EP: better than me. I mean it was that kind of thing. So it's a really great moral ending. You know, with – everybody likes him again and they applaud him. He's won their respect. He decides to give the old principal's job back. I forgot to mention this principal says that the principal is fired for being too nice to the kids. So now he decides he's not going to be a principal, that he's going to go back and pursue a career in tap dancing. And so he's going to go

and write poetry or something. So it's a great ending. But we got a letter from this woman. And ironically, she was visiting from Georgia, I think. But she was a grandmother of a kid – she brought her grandchildren, and she was like, you know, 'I was' – 'I'm just writing to say that I was aghast and dismayed at the performance I saw at the Winter Festival.' And it was unbelievable. It read like the dialogue that we've since then used in our shows. I mean I think that what I was saying, with the heckler character, was not that articulate, in its day, but now it's become very articulate with the help of this woman's letter and the help of other people like her. Her big point was that she found it awful that we were teaching the kids to disobey a figure of authority. And so, you know, we sort of stand by our – I mean, we felt bad that someone felt this moved to write a letter. An angry letter to us. But when we looked at it, we thought she was going to be upset that we were a little sloppy with our cues, or that, you know, some of the songs were too long. Or something! You know, cause we were very self-conscious about being better performers. So a letter talking about our skills would have been devastating, you know. You know, like 'It was obvious your mouth manipulation was off' or 'Your characters entrance – what did it have to do with the show?' That would have been devastating. But this letter was almost like a badge of honor. It was like she took offense to the fact that we were planting the idea in her grandchildren's heads that sometimes an authority figure should be stood up to. That you should listen to what the authority figure is saying, and if that what they were saying

00:53:02

EP: was contrary to what you knew to be right, that you shouldn't listen to that person. And this is the same kind of person that might say, 'Never say anything bad to the, you know, always do what the priest tells you to do.' You know, we take pride in the fact that we can portray a guy in a suit and a tie who walks out and says he's the king of the world, says stuff, and eventually you realize that this guy is not right. And that even if you're a little kid in second grade, that you've got the guts to say, 'Boo, mister' – you know, I just think that's an important thing to at least put out there. Cause God knows every other second of that child's educated life, they're being told the opposite. So what's the problem with a little bit of, you know, a circus comes to town one day, and turns the world upside down. That's what we do. You know, and sadly we can't really even take pride that we've even changed anybody. I mean, you know, cause what we do is we do something and for a flash there's this brilliant revelation of maybe someone can have a revelation that like, 'Wow,' you know, 'This show has given me an idea that,' you know, 'life could be wild!' But then, you know, then you go back to life being just the opposite. You know, I mean depending on the world you live in. Where people are like constantly squashing you and, you know, making you fit in and so if we resonate, you know, it depends on the individual. You know, is there somebody who will always remember that? And it's funny because we do have people coming into our studio now who are big, tall people. Men and women who say, 'Hey, in third grade, you guys' – you know – 'ate my principal.' Or, 'My best friend was eaten by the monster,' or, you know – it's pretty amazing. And we always say, 'Did we change your life?' And they're always like, 'Yes, definitely!' So that's fun.

00:54:46

VH: You said you were just in Minnesota?

00:54:49

EP: Yep, just in Minnesota, right – we were performing at a casino outside of Minneapolis for Halloween. Our rock band. And we did amazing – just big spectacle show. We hired some local performers from the Minneapolis area to perform with us, to, you know, we train them, went out a little early. They played the go-go dancing creatures and some of the other characters. We like to do that because it helps to give the show a local flavor. We get to find out what's in, what's out, what's, you know, what's happening. And then I stayed behind to do some pre-election...performance work. So the group flew home, and I stayed – cause Minneapolis was a swing state. I was performing a character that was kind of there to stir things up, create some dialogue, and raise some consciousness before the election. So I – I've been doing a lot of studying, reading, looking at both sides, looking at both candidates' positions, and really understanding their talk points from both, and trying to understand, you know, sort of the mindset of some of those predisposed to support one or the other candidates. And so the best way I thought to kind of have this interplay as a performer was to be a character who was having doubts about where he stood. So I took it upon myself to have the character I played be a Republican Party person who had always supported the Republican point of view, and was now having some doubts about the election. And by doing this, it gave me a chance to get inside the opposite of myself. I mean, I would not be predisposed to be this character.

00:56:49

EP: So I felt like it was the most challenging for me to completely be that character and be convincing and to be strong. And to make really good points on why, you know, the Bush candidacy would be the preferable, you know, one to support. So by doing that, I could now dialogue with both sides. When I came upon Kerry supporters, I was the Republican, and was like 'You guys – here's what I think, and' – you know – 'tell me why I'm wrong.' You know, like, 'What's your point of view.' And so I got to do a lot of work on both sides, to challenge both sides where I thought they needed to be challenged. First, for the Kerry supporters, and whatever you want to call them, if you want to sort of say they were Democrats, or just liberals, or people that were just, you know, Kerry supporters, I had a chance to engage people on a multitude of levels, depending entirely upon who they were. If they were real knee-jerk, reactionary liberal people, they would immediately boo, hiss me, and be really mean to the character. Which I thought was abysmal and a terrible problem and probably why there is a perception of liberals as, you know, a negative perception. This is exactly the problem. Somebody has a different point of view, and you're completely all over them? You know, with your self-justified, 'You're too dumb to know that we're right?' kind of attitude – is a really terrible thing to experience on the other side. So with those people, my character could talk with them and bring that up. Say, 'Look, I'm talking to you about advice. How do you know that I'm not wondering about if I should change my vote?' You know, and engage them. But at the same time, my main message in that instance was like, 'Look, do a better job at doing what you're doing.' You have to be – you have to listen to people, you have to realize that everybody could potentially understand your point of view. And you can't alienate them. So that was what would happen in that encounter. And depending on where they went with it, if we shook hands or were friends, I might say, 'Well, I'm glad you took the time

00:58:49

EP: to talk with me. Cause now I'm starting to think about what you said.' Another person might immediately get the irony and totally know that it was a joke, you know, kind of get it, and then, you know, really welcome – you know, in a welcome spirit, do a debate, you know. Debate and sort of say, 'Well what do you think about this?' and 'How about this issue? Well I've got a fact. Did you know this?' Then my character could say, 'Is that true? I mean, are you sure that's true?' He goes, 'Well, I mean here's a quote from the' – you know – 'president himself' or whatever. My character could then realistically, you know, process that feeling of like, 'Oh my God! The hood has been pulled over my eyes! I didn't know that and now I'm shaking and I want to know more.' And, you know, that was a really interesting encounter. Which made, I think, the person who convinced my character, made them feel really great. Like 'There is a chance! What we're doing is good work. We can' – you know, I became a symbolic testing zone, you know. I was someone they could think of changing a mind of. And so those are the two extremes of that, you know. And then there was working, you know, encountering people who were conservative or who were supporting the Republican Party. And that conversation could begin a number of ways, you know. The conservative character I was bringing to life would walk up to someone holding an enormous Bush-Cheney sign, and say, 'Can I help you hold that?' And while holding it and talking shop, and say, 'You know, I want to tell you something.' And you just, you know, be something like 'I've been conservative my whole life and I am totally into this, and I believe in trickle-down economics, I wanted to kick Iraqi ass.' You know, all this stuff. 'But did you hear about this?' or 'Did you read about that story? What do you think about that? I mean – and is it actually true that the President said this about Bin Laden? And what do you think about this idea that the 9/11 and Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with each other? What's your position on that? Do you really think it's true?' So based on what level this particular person was,

01:00:49

EP: you know, in cahoots with those points of view, we would have this conversation which would then lead to my revealing that I was obviously challenging them because I wasn't in agreement with that point of view. And then at that point there would either be a betrayal scenario or a sense of, you know, I mean there are a number of things. You know, and some people you felt like you've – I felt like there was, something was put in their hats. And they had to start thinking about this. Like they had to be haunted by this encounter with a puppet. Which is not easy to forget, I mean, you know, here it is the day before Election Day, and this puppet comes up to you and you have a conversation about politics, and then he leaves saying, 'You know, I don't necessarily think that' – you know – 'you're on the right side.' And that's going to haunt you a little bit, and maybe, you know, maybe influence you. But, you know, that's a whole other interview, my experiences there, cause this is volumes and volumes of meeting with people and really intense revelations for me about the power of art to change a single human thought. There's a lot to talk about in that realm because, you know, it was really multi – I mean, I had a lot of different experiences. Very different. But the point was that I was able to talk and work with people who would have never talked to me if I had walked up as just like who I was without the costume, they would know immediately that I wasn't with them. Or that my politics were different. And they would probably have a lot more contempt or a lot more love, or depending on who they were and what position they were in opposition to me. A lot of people probably

wouldn't even have talked, but to the puppet, the whole time looking at the puppet's eyes, they were drawn out. And they were, you know, it was like what theatre does. You know, it's like trance. It's symbolic, you know, people start talking to this thing that represents a bigger concept. And in that case, I represented the, you know, this mix of, you know, someone who's with you but starting to change his mind and so now someone has moved to maybe argue the point harder because, you know, they want this person to stick to their original beliefs. And so it was really fascinating.

01:02:49

VH: What did you look – what was your costume?

01:02:51

EP: Bunraku style character that we've kind of adapted from the Japanese aesthetic where – bunraku puppets are usually worked by people wearing black hood, working their feet, hands, and head of a character. Usually three people. What we've done is we've created a giant doll-sized version. Almost human size. And the puppeteer is one person wearing the feet on his feet, you know, wearing the hand on her hand, you know, and a hand in mouth so that the head and the body is totally alive. But there's a person behind it, like a shadow wearing black. And if you're doing your job well, no one even looks at you wearing the black. They just look at the puppet, cause it's like a magician. You're bringing something so much to life that they don't notice the slight of hand. They don't see the person behind the curtain, so to speak. So that's what we were doing.

01:03:35

VH: Did you have any interactions with people who weren't thinking to vote, for whatever reason, anti-authoritarians, or—

01:03:45

EP: Yeah—

VH: Or who just who didn't—

01:03:46

EP: Yeah. Some people who were – who thought it was all, you know. Well, one person wasn't going to vote because, you know, in his own household, I think he felt his marriage would be threatened if he voted his conscience. It was really bizarre, you know. It was that divided, you know, husbands and wives having different parties. You know, 'I guess I'll divorce you if you vote for so-and-so.' You know, that kind of thing. But – there's a lot of that, it's bizarre. But a couple people just, you know, felt like it was all crazy and a mess. But I think that they probably voted, from the interaction. It was like, 'Look, if you feel that way' – who doesn't? You know, it's just that it was a time to make it less of a mess. So...

01:04:38

VH: You mentioned...do you have – you have relatives here in Rhode Island?

01:04:47

EP: Yeah, my mother's cousins. And some people who live in the Cranston area, yeah. Yup...I can pause it if you want to think of a question.

01:05:06

VH: Oh no, it's...I guess where – so where do you go from here, personally or as a community?

01:05:14

EP: Okay, well. Now that we're, you know, we're in the world we're in, I guess we just, you know, continue with our daily missions, you know, to inspire, teach the work, continue to let the phone ring. You know, the phone rings, there's always another adventure. There's certain things we're planning on doing. Like New Year's Eve, the Bright Night Festival is an important thing to us. You know, it was cancelled last year and a number of artists who had been involved just decided to do the festival on their own and so Big Nazo was a big part of that. And it's important to keep those kinds of things alive. So we like to support our traditional – we think it's important that things continue to survive. Especially if they're community- and arts-based. I hate to see something get cancelled, you know, if it has a tradition of being around. Sort of a very negative message to the people. You know, that, 'Oh, this is transient. This won't always be around.' So we're doing our part to keep that alive in a lot of different ways. And we're continuing to take on adventures as they reveal themselves. We're going out to Kentucky soon – we've never been to Kentucky before, we're performing down there. And Halloween just ended, so this is like a quieter time for us right now. I'll be teaching my Creature Creation class in January and February. Mardi Gras is coming up. I really hope to do something fun for that. We have a building that is a Big Nazo building that we own now, that is – has a lot of renovation and design work that needs to be done. So that's a big thing, because once that exists as a permanent facility, I think we'll be able, you know, we'll move into a whole new,

01:07:14

EP: I don't know, a new sensibility. I think that when you feel like you really belong somewhere and that you can't be removed and that you're permanent in some way, I think that, you know, there's a different growth that occurs. The big challenge for the future is how to keep everything alive, you know. Keep our spaces going. Keep people learning, keep our true-and-blue constituents who have worked with us over the years, you know, are a vital part of the organization. How to define the organization. You know, continue to define it. Right now it's, you know, independent contractors who all work with me to form Big Nazo. It's not this, you know, incorporated, you know, thing. It's really a collective, but not really. It's also a sort of a benevolent despot sort of thing, too. And everybody is heard and everyone has influence. But it's

not – there's not kind of like organizational, no institutional bylaws, you know. We're sort of wildly un – I mean it's sort of an unorganized thing, but so organized. It's like the, it's a like a culture of – everyone is initiated to like what and how it works. And everyone respects that. Without having to sign a contract about it. It's really exhilarating. It's almost like an alternative model of government. I mean, you know, I obviously kind of call a lot of the shots. It's sort of my baby, but, you know, it's like totally dependent on what talent I have in, working with me. In, you know, that, like what I'm able to do and decisions that I make are completely – almost entirely dependent on the forces that are there to assist, you know.

01:09:14

EP: It's like you really look and say, 'These are my knights – these are, you know, these are the stars.' You know, 'These are the forces that make this actually happen.' So the idea is to keep people motivated to wanting to take part. And that means respecting their talents, respecting them financially, making sure that they're earning while they're working for you. That their input has weight, that they can say no anytime they want to and that's that. You know, it's pretty interesting. And I think that we live in a – I'm very interested myself personally because, you know, we're living in this society where it's either extreme. You know, either it's like everything has just been, there's so much litigation potential. There's contracts, there's pre-nuptial agreements, there are – everybody's trying to contract our lives and protect themselves. And sort of like factor in the percentage of what they'll earn in three years and then have everything all drafted up and the lawyers are involved. And that makes sense, you know, when working with big business and media, etc. But when you're working in almost sort of like a neighborhood-ly fashion where you're working with a combination of friends and soon-to-be friends, and students, and people who are coming in needing work, and you're doing this outreach, there's such loose intangibles there that you depend upon. You just have to say like, 'I believe in the goodwill to say that they're going to do what they're going to say.' Or just do what they say they're going to do. So all that creates that surfing analogy, you know, it's like even organizationally, there's a lot of intangibles that somehow work because it's been proven to work in the past. Why break, you know, why go against the ethics that seem to be at play? You know, people realize it's about mutual respect, about coming through, and representing and respecting.

01:11:14

EP: I said that twice because it's doubly important. So that's how we run things. That's how it works.

01:11:25

VH: What are some of the tricks in the surfing analogy?

01:11:31

EP: Well, I think as far as surfing and puppet-creature performance business, I think that this kind of work appeals to someone, I think, who knows how to step outside of themselves. Who

has the kind of ego that doesn't mind not being seen. That can give to something and enjoy the anonymity. You know, to take pride, that 'That's what I did and it's affecting people.' But not to need that pat on the back. To just feel like 'I'm satisfied. I know that I did that and that's good and that that worked.' And for the reward just to be the work. That's the first thing. And the second thing is for people who are good at chaos management, you know, who know how to work in an unconventional situation. You know, I mean if you're in a rock band or you're in theatre, I mean, you know about this sort of thing. I mean, you know. Things are bound to change, and global events and local events and interpersonal events change what you're going to do and how you're going to do it. To be able to roll with those punches, you know, to – takes a certain kind of person. I think someone who's really structured, really needs to know upfront, really is insecure about certain aspects of what they do, they're going to have trouble with that. You know, and all the weird stuff that has to happen.

01:13:05

VH: Well—

01:13:06

EP: Okay—

01:13:08

VH: Let's see. Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

01:13:14

EP: Well did I answer your last question, or—

01:13:14

VH: Well—

01:13:15

EP: I forgot what it was—

01:13:19

VH: What were we talking about?

01:13:21

EP: Oh, I forget. I think I got there – Oh! I think it had to do with the kind of person that, yeah the way – you asked about surfing. And about the surfing advice and I think I gave it to you, about you just have to kind of, you know, be somebody who's ready to take on that kind of

amorphous challenge, you know. Something which is very multidisciplinary. You know, it's about playing music, being funny, keeping your character alive, seeing through a little tiny whole through the nostril, sweating profusely – depending on what time of year it is – sometimes having to compete with loud music next to you or a chainsaw guy, which we did this summer at the New York State Fair. There was this guy with a chainsaw which started up in the middle of our act. We just built it into our act. We had a character come up and say, 'I can't hear the chainsaw. Can you turn your music down?' Which got a huge laugh, and, you know, so...that's it. Making the best of it.

01:14:19

VH: Okay.

01:14:22

EP: Yep, hope that's it. If there's ever anything else, just let me know.

01:14:24

VH: Okay. Yeah, you know, it's...

01:14:30

EP: So if you want to stop it, it's—